



By Lt. Greg Brown

We were flying FA-18s off Southern California. It was a pinky launch for a night recovery doing captive SLAM ER work. Except for a later-than-expected push time, the flight was uneventful. My lead and I were within a couple hundred pounds of ladder. Since he had launched first and had flown a low profile for part of the hop, while I stayed at altitude, I should have had at least 1,000 pounds more than him. Though I hadn't properly managed my fuel, I still was above ladder.

After a manual push, I flew the CV 1, rolled out on final bearing, and prepared to get aboard. When I descended out of 1,200 feet and cleared the marine layer, I could see one aircraft between the ship and my aircraft. Before he could call the

ball, he was waved off for a foul deck. Soon, so was I.

"One look at the ball, two to go," I thought. Tank fuel was 3,000 pounds. I turned downwind at half flaps and waited for a turn to final. No call came at four miles downwind, no call at six miles, and still no call at eight miles. This wasn't a huge surprise since others had lower fuel states than mine, including my lead. At 10 miles out, I started to get concerned. Finally, after 12 miles upwind, I got a turn to final bearing.

"Say fuel state," approach requested.

In my best "listen carefully" voice, I said, "State 3.5." I would be trick-or-treat on the ball. With North Island 140 miles away, boltering would put me below bingo-divert numbers.



Adding to the heartburn were the calls coming over the radio from paddles. “Power, power...easy with it...bolter, bolter, bolter,” he called. It sounded like the deck was moving.

I tried to save as much fuel as possible. On final, I held gear and half flaps with my hand on the landing-gear handle. I dirtied up at six miles and saw the tanker roll in overhead. The glide path was centered as I started down. I called the ball with 3,100 pounds.

It wasn’t the best pass. I got too low in close, added a bunch of power to catch it, then pulled a fistful off to make a play for the 4-wire with paddles talking to me the whole way. I had

no such luck, another bolter. It later was assessed as a no-count bolter. Thanks, paddles. I looked up and saw the tanker ahead at 3,000 feet. I cleaned up, climbed, and locked him up to get closure. I heard flight lead was getting gas; he also had bolted.

With about 1.5 miles to join, I heard an S-3 call in hyds down, tanker sour. “I hope that’s not mine,” I thought. Just then over the radio came, “Four zero four, your signal is divert. North Island bears 049.”

I went to mil and started an aggressive right turn. I then selected the North Island waypoint and accelerated for a climb. My fuel was 2,800 pounds. I was concerned with my drag index and how far I was below divert fuel. The divert-matrix card on my kneeboard read 3,000 pounds. Fuel-divert calculations leave 1,500 pounds in

the tanks, which is plenty to get the gear and flaps down for approach if there aren’t any contingencies. Two data-link pods, two tanks, LDT, FLIR, CATM 9, and TACTS pod put me close to the 100-drag index, if not over it. The potential for cloud layers and for flying an actual instrument approach, while being 200 pounds below divert fuel, were going to take a worrisome bite out of that reserve.

I wasn’t flying the best climb profile, either. Initially, I got too fast. I declared emergency fuel with Beaver Control and told them I was climbing to 40,000 feet. The jet took a long time making that last 5,000 feet with the recommended .78 Mach. I still was nervous until I reached altitude and set the cruise fuel flow, checked the winds, and saw they were helping. I checked the range on FPAS and saw there would be 1,000 pounds plus after reaching North Island—assuming I stayed at that altitude. The fuel picture would be even better after an idle descent.

As I neared San Diego, I started seeing lightning along the coast. The weather brief had called for some layers but not CBs. I later realized the storms were farther inland, along the mountain ridges.

I completed the ship-to-shore checklist, designated the North Island waypoint to get a five-to-six-degree, nose-down reference, then started down at 60 miles. I descended through several layers and breathed a sigh of relief after breaking out at 10,000 feet and getting the field in sight at 3,000 feet. Predictably, with the tail winds and a puckered-nozzle descent, I ended up being high. SOCAL gave me a small cut away to set me up for a normal approach. This gave me a couple miles on glidepath, on speed, and time to complete the landing checks. Fuel was 1,300 pounds. The landing was uneventful.

I should have managed my fuel properly and flown the proper airspeed for max endurance and range. This would have given me another look at the boat before being directed to tank. I probably would have gotten aboard.

The time to check drag index and plan your bingo is during preflight planning, not during the climb. You should plan for all contingencies. Even though we were blue-water ops, there were suitable divers. Going to the beach always was a possibility, but I wasn’t prepared. 🦅

Lt. Brown flies with VFA-147.